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## NATURE STUDY IN COMMERCIAL ENGLISH I

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HAZEL V. PARIS

Rockford College, Rockford, Ill.

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On my first day in a former position I greeted, one after another, four delightful classes. "Not so bad," I thought, as they met me and attended to the details of the hour in a proper non-Bolshevik fashion. In fact I was distinctly pleased. I had been told repeatedly that my Sargent position had not given me the training requisite to high-school teaching, that "my hand was out," until I had been rather dubious about making a change.

The sixth hour, however, shattered my "risen" spirits. When the bell rang, in clattered the most disreputable gang I had ever seen outside of the slums. They banged down their books, sprawled in their chairs, and glared defiantly at me. My heart sank. There were seventeen of them, and only four looked as if they had ever had a square meal or come into contact with soap and water.

I called them to order, attended to the necessary details connected with the first class of the semester, and, after having assigned the task for the next day, attempted to shed a ray of light upon the work.

Please don't get the idea that the scene was calm and unruffled. It wasn't. There was no open revolt, but I felt as if I were standing on the edge of a volcano which was boiling and seething, threatening an eruption at any moment.

My simple explanations of passages floated over their heads. My questions, so clear as to answer themselves, were met by monosyllabic grunts or long, vague, and unintelligible responses. As the hour progressed, the spirit of bolshevism gradually melted away, leaving one of indifference. I was in despair. Antagonism is at least positive, but apathy—I felt as if I were face to face with a stone wall. And yet the pupils weren't entirely to blame. I found later that of the seventeen students, only three girls were

not "repeaters." Some were repeating for the third time and one boy for the fifth.

The book they were assigned is totally lacking in interest for Freshmen in high school; it is beyond their reach. There seems to be an idea current that if every boy and girl the minute he or she reaches high school, reads *How to Study*, studies *How to Study* faithfully for two weeks, he will have learned how to study, and the educational process thereafter will be simple. Now Commercial English I had had that trick played on them before. They had heard *How to Study* praised extravagantly, and they had discovered for themselves that it contained none of the miracle-working qualities attributed to it. We survived the ordeal, however, doing as little as we could in the text (and doing it only to fulfil the spirit of the law). It is harrowing to have to adopt such a course and altogether demoralizing to a teacher.

In the meantime I had confided in my principal, and had asked him to visit the class, hoping for suggestions. He came, he saw—and he confirmed my opinion "that I had a rare combination." Nearly all of the boys had had serious trouble, not only in school but outside; several had been recently suspended. He assured me that the trouble was not with me as I had insisted, told me to do what I could, assuring me that I should not be held responsible for any results whatever.

I was somewhat relieved and not a little spurred. His expectation of no results made me long for a miracle. I dropped ten of the twenty years I had acquired, and turned to Poe with a lighter heart. He again was an old story and far too tame. My stories suffered from the same deficiency.

Meanwhile I was making the composition work as spectacular as I could. Hitchcock<sup>1</sup> had been too often repeated to give me any help.

I remembered, from my study of pedagogy, the word *emulation*. It really is, according to authorities, endowed with all sorts of supernatural qualities. I rejoiced in the thought that I had found the key to the situation. A theme-book would encourage competition; it was just what Commercial I needed. Well, we had one,

<sup>1</sup> Alfred M. Hitchcock, *Enlarged Practice Book in English Composition*.

but I'd hate to display it. Then the idea came to me of a journal, edited once fortnightly by a committee who, because of superior work, had earned the honor of serving on the editorial staff. I tried it, and had a near-riot on my hands. "They didn't want no journal." At first they thought the scheme a good joke; then when I tried to press it, they assured me that a journal would mean work. There was no one in the group who coveted honor when it was a handmaiden to work. "Thou shalt not labor at any time," was a fixed precept in their decalogue.

Spelling matches, because they could skimp the preparation, and guess "for better or for worse," and a continued story were the only exercises that really were entirely successful. The story contained the most realistic account of a shipwreck I have ever read. I could hear the women and children shrieking as the life boats were being lowered. I was in the icy sea with the heroine who was rescued just in the nick of time by the hero. When she was finally re-united with her parents (who were unaware of the fact that "she was on her way to Providence to get a job"), I was very much relieved.

The only thing that kept me going was the fact the class was responding to me and was really very orderly. After I had sent two of them to the office, I had no serious trouble with discipline. Some of them were trying hard to be friendly. Harold Steed, who sat in my room, came once after school and offered me chocolate almonds out of the dirtiest hand I ever saw. He did helpful little things about the room, without being asked, too, and went on countless errands. I was soon deprived of his assistance, however, as, after he was caught stealing in the five-and-ten-cent store, the probation officer gave him a chance to leave town. Every time I praised Jeremiah Daley for doing anything well, he looked up at me with the expression of a whipped dog who has been spoken to kindly. In John Leary's face there was often an expression of genuine interest and enthusiasm, though, poor little chap, he was absolutely incapable of learning even the simplest things.

It was about this time that I brought over some of my beloved juvenile books, *The Minute Boys of Lexington*, *The Minute Boys of Concord*, some of Ellis Parker Butler's things, *War the Creator* by

Gelett Burgess, and several copies of *The Open Road*. Not great literature, to be sure, but what chance do Cooper, Scott, or any others of the immortals stand with a class who live in spirit in saloons, jails, who in imagination commit the most appalling crimes and outwit the cleverest detectives? I never realized there was such stuff written. They repeated tales to me that made my hair stand on end, and brought me books to read because "they were swell stories."

My books took like wild fire. Why, I don't know. They *were* juveniles, some of them, and were therefore to be scorned, some would think. I felt otherwise. I should far rather see Commercial I reading books that were immature than books which were absolutely demoralizing.

The sixth period on Friday, a study hour which I allowed them to use for reading approved books, was peaceful and enjoyable—that is after all disagreements as to who should have what were settled. They began to bring in their own books, and one boy became a regular contributor to *The Open Road*. I always managed to know what each pupil was reading, discussed the book with him very frankly, and suggested something "he might like better," or, if the author in question was commendable, pointed out others of his works, or works along the same line.

Commercial I was settled. There was an atmosphere of unity in the class, of more or less earnestness toward the work. I could see that their interests were changing. I was getting fewer blood-and-thunder themes, both oral and written; even the covers of the books they were reading appeared more respectable. Their language was improving. But there was a lack of enthusiasm I deplored. They seemed almost mechanical as they filed in, did the day's work, and filed out, needing to be carefully watched only in the corridor. I longed for a miracle to transform Commercial I, and I longed not in vain. The miracle happened in an entirely unexpected way at an unexpected moment. Neither my keen interest in the class nor my application of pedagogical principles solved the problem.

One afternoon when we all were a bit restless, I picked up a copy of *Atlantic Classics*, and turned to "Turtle Eggs for Agassiz."

I had been using the narrative with College II as an example of an adventure story. They had enjoyed it immensely, but their interest did not indicate a like state of mind on the part of Commercial I. College II was an unusual group.

Before I began to read, I told them briefly about Professor Sharp and Professor Agassiz and the circumstances which led to the writing of the story. Then I commenced with the narrative, "I was principal of an academy during my younger days."

The first part evoked mild interest and amusement, but when I struck the paragraph which began the tale of Professor Jenks's wild ride, I knew I "*had* the class" as I never before had had them. "That horse knew, as well as I, that the turtles had laid, and that he was to get those eggs to Agassiz. He turned out of that field into the road on two wheels, a thing he had not done for twenty years, doubling me up before the dashboard, the pail of eggs miraculously lodged between my knees."

They were in the gig; they were pounding down the woodroad, across the open fields. They were holding up the locomotive, speeding past towns, hills, and meadows into Boston, dropping over the train-yard fence, and eluding the fat policeman who moved away at the opportune instant. How familiar and real that last experience was! They were tearing along deserted streets, bumping and clashing over the cobblestones, and rattling around in the herdic. At last they arrived, and waited breathlessly while "the great man with a swift clean stroke laid open one of the eggs, as the watch in *their* trembling hand ticked its way to seven as if nothing unusual were happening to the history of the world." *They* had brought turtle eggs to Agassiz.

For a moment or two after I had finished I could feel the tenseness of the atmosphere. Then as they sighed and "let down," I was beset by a dozen questions and comments. It was "a swell story"; that was certain. The narrative had succeeded; the turtle eggs were of lesser importance, but I was determined that they should serve my purpose, and so I turned the spotlight upon them.

In a flash the class forgot the excitement of the trip, and clamored to tell me not only their own experiences with turtles but the experiences of every "feller" they had known. Finally

I managed to bring order out of chaos, and had a splendid set of oral themes. Of course they often "seen" the turtles, and the "fellers" often "got bit." But what show does grammar stand when Commercial I talks about turtles?

I had found my cue. Every one of these little chaps, despite the fact that they live in the most sordid surroundings and indulge in the cheapest amusements, does go out into the woods and knows a surprising amount about outdoor life.

When they found that my knowledge of the tortoise family was extremely limited, they immediately set to work to fill in the chinks of my education. For a few lessons I received written themes galore about turtles, oral themes, illustrations, reference books. Before class and after class they privately passed over choice bits of information. I was even promised a turtle to keep on my table. I was informed each day of the progress of the search for a pet of suitable size and variety. I did not exactly understand what the adverse weather conditions were that finally prevented his appearance; I was too thankful that there *were* weather conditions to pay much heed to the detailed explanation of them.

When I returned from Wellesley one day and told the class that I had seen turtles in their habitat, that I had *seen* one digging to lay her eggs and that she had snapped at me when I became too curious, they were satisfied. I was progressing famously.

Now turtles don't exist alone out of doors, and turtle literature is limited. "Emilius,"<sup>1</sup> Miss Bates's delightful account of Miss Balch's experience with a turtle interested them less keenly than Professor Sharp's account. It wasn't as exciting. Happily I turned to dogs—and Sigurd<sup>2</sup> was every bit as inspiring as any of our tortoise study had been. They loved him dearly, begged me to read about him again and again, and never tired of hearing about his collie pranks. The fact that "he had been in college with me," made him all the more dear to them and invested me with a certain amount of prestige.

Again I became the pupil and they the teacher. When one has never had anything but a Maltese cat to match with dogs—dogs of all varieties, of all grades of intelligence—what can one expect?

<sup>1</sup> Katherine Lee Bates, *Sigurd, Our Golden Collie*.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*

She must become a humble learner. Dogs they had read about, dogs that belonged to "fellers" they knew—all remarkable dogs, of course—figured now as in the case of the turtles. I hadn't heard about Deadeye Dick, the Ramblin' Kid, and "the cop that caught the guy that murdered the beautiful lady" for so long that I had nearly forgotten them.

By this time we had broadened our horizon considerably. I had posted, on the bulletin board, two sheets of white paper, whereon a boy, if he saw a flower or bird before anyone else in class had seen one of the same variety, had his name placed.

"Miss Paris, I *seen* a blackbird yesterday."

"Splendid, Jeremiah! I'm glad you *saw* a blackbird."

"Aw, that ain't nuthin'. I seen *them* a long time ago. I seen a pair of bluebirds yesterday in the Fells."

"Fine, Paul. I *saw* a bluebird too."

I must admit that in our enthusiasm we very often forgot to use good grammar. But really, if I must choose, I prefer to have them "seen a bluebird" than not see *anything*.

The bird- and flower- lists were accomplishing two results. There was intense rivalry as to who should have his name appear on the lists the greatest number of times. I noticed, too, that the students in my room and in my other classes were observing the bulletin board most carefully and were casually informing me of out-of-door experiences.

In order to accomplish their ends they were going on long hikes and were observing nature closely on their way to and from school, on their errands about the city. One day we all stopped to watch from the window a flock of wild ducks in passage. Occasionally we heard a robin singing on the lawn at the side of the school. I could see by their expressions that the song really meant something to them.

The day that I reported having seen a pair of Baltimore orioles the evening previous was a red-letter day. Nothing would do but that my name should go on the list. I had commanded their everlasting respect. No one had seen even a single oriole.

By this time spring had advanced, and the room had taken on the aspect of a botanical garden. At first the profuseness of flowers had served to distract slightly the attention of one of my



other classes. I think I was the only teacher in the building, with the exception of one who had a vase of paper daffodils on her desk, who tried to corral spring for school purposes. I'm sure no one else taught English with a botanical or zoölogical slant. After the first object lesson, however, my method became a matter of routine.

When we read "The Daffodils," we had daffodils "fluttering and dancing in the breeze" of the ventilator. When we read about

A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!

we had a bunch of violets peeping over the top of the desk. Vases of lilacs gave a real spring atmosphere to "The Barrel Organ." Of course all that Commercial I got from either the "Lucy" poems or "The Barrel Organ" was the music. College II and Scientific IV understood much of the thought.

Often there were lessons which had no connection with the English at all. If a flower which was the least bit unusual had been brought in, I had a straight botany lesson in all classes. The lady's slipper, the Jack-in-the-pulpit, the pitcher plant—all served as splendid object lessons. Aside from enriching a class's store of knowledge, lessons of this type stimulate intelligent discussion, strengthen the power of observation, and draw out information that would otherwise be buried—especially in the case of diffident pupils.

The realization on the part of a pupil that he has contributed something worth while to the recitation gives him a certain confidence that carries over. He is led to take a more active part in the discussions which arise along other lines. It is, moreover, wholesome for a class to listen respectfully to a fellow-member who can speak with authority on the subject in hand. Boys especially are more at home in the woods and fields than they are within doors.

I can't advise any methods in the use of nature material, because I know of none. It is obvious, of course, that the use of it should be "connected up" with the English. That is simple. You can find a connection between anything and English. All a teacher can do is watch her class carefully, and when she thinks

they need to be jogged a bit or inspired, drop grammar, spelling, rhetoric, and read something that will reach them, stimulate them, and make them reverent.

One can encourage oral and written accounts of hikes, camping trips, feathered friends, flowers, domestic pets. Individual lists of birds and flowers observed as well as the one displayed on the bulletin board, stir up a spirit of competition as well as increase the powers of observation. Lectures illustrated by stereopticon views, carefully selected etchings or pictures on the walls of the recitation room, lists of outside reading compiled with attention to the nature interest of the books, the announcement of floral displays in adjacent neighborhoods, the profuse use of natural objects in the room (a chrysalis, an abandoned bird's nest, flowers), the use of nature books as texts—all of those things not only make the English work richer and more inspiring, but they add the store of nature knowledge every child should have.

Over a hundred years ago Wordsworth told us that

The world is too much with us.

If only he could live now and see how much more it is with our young folks! Trashy novels, cheap "movies," dances, wild automobile rides, the general absence of a normal, peaceful home life, even in the case of our so-called "best children," are working a most pernicious influence. Think what effect dime novels, melodramatic motion pictures, crap games, street fights, have on boys and girls reared in ignorance and filth and poverty! It isn't appalling to me that many of our young people go wrong; it is remarkable that so many of them survive at all and complete the high-school course without landing in reformatories.

We all of us need to get away from what Henry Beston calls "our asphalt-pavement point of view," and the surest and best way is through nature and nature literature. One does not need methods. What one does need for guidance is a sympathetic understanding of her pupils, a deep love for nature, and as broad a knowledge of it as she can acquire. She must hike. She must be as reliable an authority on outdoor life as she is on grammar, rhetoric, and themes. Furthermore, she must share her experiences, without stint, with her classes.

If she is ignorant of the way the thrush builds his nest, let her acknowledge the fact. Ten to one Timothy Mahoney or Sadie Werlinsky can help her out. One's enthusiasm for the great out of doors is far more highly infectious than one's detailed technical knowledge of English or any other subject. A class whose interest and enthusiasm are aroused along any line, however far removed it may be from the subject which the school report lists you as teaching, is far easier to teach than one which has no common ground to meet on. The former group is alive and receptive.

After all it isn't *subjects* we're any of us teaching; it's boys and girls. And we're not teaching them subjects primarily; we are, or should be, teaching them how to live not only these years when they are with us, but all the rest of the days they are on this earth.

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## OUR TASK

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PAUL S. NICKERSON  
Canton, Mass.

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To plunge into the purple depths of eyes,  
And seek and find and know what therein lies—  
This is our task.

To scan far hilltops for the glint of wings  
Yet search the dullest life for holy things,  
Is a wide task.

To see beyond crude themes piled on a shelf  
To the sweet unfolding of an humble self,  
Is a true task.

To weave the breath of dreams, the smile of beauty,  
Into youth's eager life—a lovely duty—  
A blessed task.

To yield our being to the learner's soul  
And by giving, keep our being young and whole—  
What a happy task!